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AUTHOR Holmes, Gary E.; Stalling, Janice E.
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ABSTRACT

The fact that interpersonal conflict and subsequent resolution are primarily social behaviors between groups of people often becomes obscured by cultural norms. Professional counselors routinely encounter conflict in their work with clients. This paper provides an introductory discussion on the psychocultural aspects of conflict to assist counselors in understanding the social dimensions. Struggling with some form of social conflict is common among counseling clients of all ages. Counselors may find therapeutic value in helping clients explore the cultural and social foundation of conflict. By examining the forces of culture and society that lead to predictable conflict behavior, clients may develop alternative responses for themselves and others. (Contains 34 references.) (JDM)

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Psychocultural Aspects of Conflict and Resolution:

A Primer for Professional Counselors

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G Holmes
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Gary E. Holmes, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
Department of Human Relations
University of Oklahoma - Tulsa
700 N. Greenwood Avenue
Tulsa, OK 74106
(918) 594-8457
gholmes@ou.edu

Janice E. Stalling, Ed.D., NCC, LPC
Associate Professor
Department of Human Services
College of Education
Stephen F. Austin State University
P. O. Box 6079, SFA Station
Nacogdoches, TX 75962-6079

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Abstract

Common sense notions of conflict and of resolution often obscure more accurate views. Cultural norms that influence our behaviors during conflict may not focus attention on the fact that conflict and resolution are primarily social behaviors. Professional counselors who work with a variety of clients encounter conflict of one kind or another on a routine basis. To assist counselors in understanding the social dimensions of conflict, this article provides an introductory discussion on the psychocultural aspects of conflict that can enhance clinical work with clients. The article is intended for counselors and therapists whose clients may perceive conflict in their own lives in ways that diminish understanding and growth.

Psychocultural Aspects of Conflict and Resolution:

A Primer for Professional Counselors

Common sense notions of conflict often center upon the assumed psychological characteristics of the people involved and upon identifiable issues of contention. However, many aspects of conflict and resolution can be better understood by examining the social forces that help shape conflict among humans. In that open conflict always requires at least two persons, it is by definition a social phenomenon. Following a psychocultural developmental perspective, this article offers an interdisciplinary overview of the cultural and social aspects of conflict that help frame the psychological motifs of people involved in conflict.

The article focuses upon social learning (socialization) that helps people understand the "rules" of social life – even those rules that suggest how conflict itself is to be handled. Professional counselors in a variety of settings deal with conflict of one kind or another on a routine basis. For them, understanding social aspects of conflict can provide therapeutic frameworks (psychoeducational) to help clients think in new ways about their own involvement in conflict. A psychocultural perspective of conflict thus points toward new possibilities for client skill-building and toward

more enduring resolutions. New conflict-handling skills can strengthen existing primary relationships and lead to new or better ones.

Psychocultural Viewpoints

Americans seem to have a peculiar view of conflict, imagining that it is primarily a form of psychological behavior. Many define and describe conflict as if it were synonymous with contest. Common speech expressions about conflict are filled with ideas about winning, strategies, warfare, revenge, and retaliation. In essence, such language portrays social behavior that is aimed at winning a contest, at shaping people to be either winners or losers. That this language metaphorically equates everyday conflict with other social behavior, like war and sports, is both obvious and culturally acceptable.

However, acceptability aside, such language may limit the kinds of resolutions that can arise from our best efforts – the language may lead us toward oversimplified perspectives that do as much harm as good. For example, if conflict language demands that only winners and losers are possible, all resolutions will cast participants in one role or the other. Reframing this language to suggest a win-win scenario may fall flat because the idea arises from the same psychocultural theme of conflict as contest. Win-win jargon can easily be perceived by conflict participants as a lose-lose doctrine, serving only to disappoint and to set the stage for

additional conflict. In any instance of conflict-as-contest, there is a fifty-percent probability that any one party will emerge as the loser.

To the degree that anger and shame can also be issues during conflict (Scheff, 1999), participants may be even less inclined to assume the role of loser. If a social challenge to one's personal honor is answered ineffectually, the confounding emotions of anger and shame may increase the probability of additional conflict. This idea is applicable not only to interpersonal and intergroup conflict, but also to conflict between institutional factions. Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton (1995) speculated that much conflict in America might be due not to diversity, but to the ideological differences between average people and powerful cultures of technology and bureaucracy. Different ideologies engender different norms about conflict behaviors. Technological and bureaucratic cultures (and organizations) usually possess more social and economic power than individuals to invest in honor-related disputes.

Diverse populations produce diverse points of view. Part of the psychocultural framing of conflict is derived from differing values and ideologies. General social values, bureaucratic values, religious values, and values of special interest groups often collide to produce conflict. Different ways of defining justice, for example, contribute to how conflict is framed socially and psychologically (see Williams, 1983). Kidder (1996)

found that most human groups include fairness as a moral virtue worthy of society. This does not mean, however, that all social groups practice the same brand of fairness or that they all practice fairness at the same time. Group identity and personal socialization affect how the individual person perceives fairness, justice, and appropriateness of response to social situations.

Differences among people generate different actions and reactions, and help shape patterns of conflict participation. Preferred goals, outcomes, or resolutions are usually conceptualized to be consistent with the way in which conflict is framed in the first place. Thus, conflict-as-contest thinking leads to resolution goals that are generally compatible with psychological or symbolic winning. Conversely, conflict viewed as opportunity for cooperation tends to suggest resolutions that are cooperative in a social sense. To the degree that the "self" embedded in social personhood is a continual process of construction (Meyer, 1986), both conflict and cooperation provide valid learning opportunities.

Social Norms and Conflict

The socialization process in every culture serves to teach new generations the rules of acceptable personal conduct. Regardless of how perfect or imperfect this cultural transmission might be, people develop their worldviews and self-identities in part from their understanding of the

social rules or "norms" of behavior. Social and cultural norms, once internalized, help constitute psychological life, contributing to the psychological "knowledge" of right and wrong, of successful personhood, and of personal identity. The rules of norm-defined behaviors seem personally natural and true when development continues along a consistent path.

Although many social norms are evident during conflict, two important clusters of norm-patterned behaviors are particularly relevant to an understanding of conflict. The norms or rules of cooperation seem antithetical to the cluster of norms that dictate how we may behave during times of interpersonal conflict. Put another way, it is difficult to have social cooperation and social conflict at the same time. Social cooperation norms are based on both valid reasoning and on social encouragement to conform (Bicchieri, 1990). Viewed as a set of rules, norms of cooperation help shape our ideas about expectations and responsibilities of social interaction, guiding us in cooperative efforts.

On the other hand, norms of conflict in American society often harbor notions of individual behaviors that are blatantly uncooperative ---- such as revenge. Norms of personal and social honor underlie norms of revenge --- when honor is violated, revenge (real or symbolic) becomes a method through which one might restore lost honor (Elster, 1990). To

those for whom personal honor is of great importance, revenge may be perceived as the only way to restore honor needed for self-respect and for social personhood.

It may be too strong a case to argue that honor is always an issue in interpersonal conflict. And yet, the variety of sophisticated, symbolic forms of honor and revenge is large, and it is not always easy to recognize expressions of honor. It is safe to say, however, that in those conflicts that seem devoid of real issues or characterized by ever-changing issues, sense of honor may well be what is at stake for the participants. Matters of honor in such instances may become more easily discerned when "winning" is more symbolic than real. Psychocultural influences might prepare some people to approach conflict with "us against them" thinking, a recipe for handling conflict as contest. In turn, resolution attempts may be characterized by competitive language instead of by authentic dialogue (Carnevale & Holmes, in progress).

For example, a few years ago a divorcing couple with few financial resources spent several thousand dollars in attorney fees arguing over a property settlement. The property in question consisted of one bottle of shampoo that cost about $6.00. In this instance, there was very little real difference between winning and losing. Yet, the principle involved was important ---- the legal arena is adversarial in nature, so conflict there is

legitimately viewed as a contest. The "winner" stood to gain shampoo and restored, symbolic honor, regardless of the financial cost.

Norms that guide intergroup relations tend to be elaborate and ambiguous (Ross, 1997). In addition, different groups often have different ideas and norms about how people should behave. The individual social actor may therefore be uncertain how to act in any given situation. An individual may misinterpret behavior in others as a violation of honor, when it is not intended to be. Under such circumstances, opportunities for social conflict increase concurrently with misunderstanding. When winning become the goal, conflict may undermine all future encounters between groups.

The person operating within the context of intercultural and intergroup relations may be unfamiliar with different norms and ideals of appropriate behaviors, but he or she may also not recognize social cues to behavior that others offer. Even people with similar cultural backgrounds, but with different social class or socioeconomic status may view the world in divergent ways (Herr, 1989). Unintentional conflict occurs easily in such situations. Neither one's own cultural experiences nor learned stereotypes about others serve well in such instances. Counselors must explore clients' cultural ways and behaviors collaboratively (Christopher, 1999), knowing that individual differences may vary widely.

Social instability contributes to conflict through weak or changing norms, a condition that tends to enhance the likelihood of conflict (Rubin, Pruitt, and Kim, 1994). It might seem that strong social norms, then, would generally help keep conflict to a minimum. However, such an assumption would be premature unless the nature of strong social norms is taken into account. American society, for example, has strong values and norms for both cooperation and autonomy. Their strength, however, does not seem to decrease conflict in any general way. This contradictory idea might suggest that conflict flourishes as norm-driven behaviors become more symbolic and less actual. In other words, strength of social norms may not signal social stability in the interpersonal sense.

Honor and Personhood

A simplified "psychological" view holds that the cause of conflict is somehow inside the individual, while the conflict behavior merely reflects internal character. Conflict is often viewed (or marginalized) as "personality conflict", although the term explains little. However, when social variables are taken into account conflict suddenly becomes a complex phenomenon. Social norms, individual development (learning), situational parameters, and behavior of at least one other person must be considered.

Although the social idea of personal honor seems simple enough, protecting it is not. As Bourdieu (1991) observed, consensual social status implies social boundaries or behaviors. In that a personal sense of honor may simultaneous be the product of social consensus and the product of idiosyncratic development, the social actor can never be certain that others will acknowledge personal honor, suppress it, or even recognize its existence. It is important to note here that Bourdieu's observation begins with the recognition of social *status*. Some people may ignore, disregard, misperceive, misconstrue, or subordinate social status and any usual boundaries attached to or defined by honor.

A breach of honor presents an immediate, complex challenge to the individual whose honor has been breached (actual or imagined). Hewitt (1989) noted that continuity of self is a prime ingredient of personal identity. On the intrapersonal level, loss of honor may be paramount to risking one's continuity of self or identity. It is important to note that unmet challenges to one's sense of honor may not be minimized or downplayed by the individual to whom the challenges are made. Having learned the rules of honor through socialization, he or she knows in a global way precisely what honor entails. The risk to selfhood and personhood are generally perceived accurately within the context of individual worldview. Defensive and offensive behaviors may seem prudent and rational.

Unmet challenges of honor have significant implications in the social world. The prescribed or "awarded" status of *personhood* itself may be at stake. Unmet challenges to honor may reduce the taken-for-granted social status of personhood --- the risk is that one will no longer be considered a "real" person in the eyes of others.

Bourdieu (1977) recognized that a challenge to one's honor indicates that the challenger grants to the one being challenged the capability of dealing with matters of honor. In other words, the challenge itself grants a degree of honor in acknowledging the challenged as one in whom honor may be found. Authentic, social personhood incorporates honor as a requisite. Failing to respond to a challenge of honor might convey a social message that one's honor is inconsequential and will not be defended. Status suffers and personhood declines.

In a sense, responding to challenges of honor may be a form of symbolic status indicator that helps constitute personhood itself (see Searle, 1995). In other words, responding to an honor challenge through direct conflict may not only protect social identity, it may also help constitute it. One can recognize a "real" person by his or her willingness to protect or preserve personal honor. The social context of honor is simultaneously personal, cultural, and even mythical. Slotkin (2000) illustrated the origin of the American idealized myth in frontier times,

noting its inherent notion of confidence to prevail. The ideal of the self-contained, autonomous, confident "hero" revolved around notions of strong honor, yet this ideal is problematic in some respects. As Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton (1995) noted, the too-honest, too-honorable hero usually must live on the fringes of society. Such a hero in everyday life might be embroiled in constant conflict proving honor and personhood beyond the norm.

Conversely, people sometimes do make unilateral concessions in conflict. These concessions might at first appear to represent an abandonment of honor concerns. Lawler, Ford, and Large (1999) speculated that concessions of this type seem most effective when, among other things, they serve to "...enhance the user's trustworthiness... (p. 254)." In other words, concessions support honor by first supporting trustworthiness. Trustworthiness here might suggest a demonstrated willingness to cooperate as a social insider, hereby avoiding isolation.

Necessary Skills

Social norms shape the foundation of personal psychology, but they do not constitute rigid destiny. Some cultures teach norms of cooperation over competition to reduce conflict, emphasizing a value for sharing among citizens (Nuckolls, 1998). Others emphasize individual autonomy that seems more conducive to conflict. And yet, people are not

solely under the influence of norms, and they do not simply live out norm-driven behaviors like robots. Instead, norms are dynamic personally and collectively (see Meyer, 1986). Even so, social and cultural norms can exert strong influences on emerging behaviors, particularly in those who value social conformity, but who do not reflect upon their own behavioral patterns.

One's social position helps determine how one interprets the social rules or norms he or she has learned. Conflicting messages about appropriate social behavior are resolved in part by accurately discerning one's own social position in relation to the power of others (Turiel & Wainryb, 2000). For example, what might be considered appropriate behavior (norm-defined) for wealthy people, might be considered inappropriate behavior for the poor. Social status mediates the expression of social norm behaviors.

Norms, then, become part of one's being and serve to guide social behaviors. Social skills derived from cultural and social norms typically include self-management of emotions (Wouters, 1991) that can help reduce conflict within a group. However, things may be more complex in an industrialized nation like America where there are strong norms of individuality, a diverse population, and a well-documented history of people struggling for symbolic honor and often for revenge. Emotional

management requires specific skills to help the individual maintain personhood status and personal honor.

Developmentally, empathy, autonomy, personhood, and negotiation may be considered social skills important to conflict and to resolution. Personhood emerges from social experiences, cultural learning, and from personal striving for identity. Psychologists have long recognized that adolescence is a period of life characterized by strong conformity behaviors (Faw & Belkin, 1989). Conformity is safe precisely because it reduces conflict that might arise from attempts at autonomous personhood. American culture produces an abundance of conflicting messages about freedom and authority (Hewitt, 1989) that make emerging personhood a risky enterprise.

As Lerner (1994) has noted, anger discourages both empathy and creative problem solving. Seen from the developmental perspective, anger may be an uncertain or unsafe behavior for those in the process of learning personhood. Conformity has the advantage of being unlikely to be misinterpreted as a challenge to someone's honor, while expressed anger may easily be perceived as a challenge. Conformity may thus be viewed as a valuable social skill that has the effect of decreasing the likelihood of conflict among peers. One may feel free to conform, but uncertain about the personal "authority" needed for full-fledged autonomy.

In time, adolescence gives way to adulthood in which notions of empathy and willingness to resolve conflict are ideally present. In life generally, conflict helps the individual form social associations with others who are of like mind (Coser, 1956). Conformity remains a skill because new associations require social cooperation to survive. Empathy among associates tends to reinforce these cooperative efforts. Maturity, as the culmination of increased experiences in the world, may lead to skills of empathy and peace-making because experience proves such skills are not distractions from personal autonomy.

Some of the same issues are played out at the national and international levels. In the modern era, sovereignty (state autonomy) conflicts directly with human rights (personal autonomy) (Benhabib, 1999). Both points of view include ideas about personal and group honor. Advocates of the autonomous state may claim that it is more honorable to conform to state mandates. Yet, advocates of personal autonomy may claim that state autonomy infringes on individual rights.

Professionals may play an important developmental role in clients' lives in such matters. They can help clients learn new skills, improve existing ones, and understand psychological influences of cultural norms. Helping clients explore perspectives from which they might contemplate such constructs as personhood, honor, and socially acceptable behaviors

may be instrumental in helping clarify client values, preferences, and social goals. Put another way, a new perspective can help clients break the pattern of seeing conflict as a contest, of thinking in terms of winners and losers, and of using conflict to maintain personhood status. The ability to view conflict from a popular psychocultural perspective allows one the freedom to escape the psychological model that so often conjures up conflict in terms of personal symptoms. From a theoretical perspective, therapeutic goals aimed at this sort of deconstruction of conflict is closely related to ecological counseling (Conyne, 1988), that sees clients and their environments as inseparable.

Elster (1989) noted that threats arising from a code of honor may be particularly effective simply because they will be carried out even against the ultimate best interests of the individual making them. However, a strong case could be made that such honor-backed threats are consistent with one's best interests when his or her personhood status is at stake. From a developmental perspective, personal honor and dignity are shaped by moral visions of what personhood should be, and therefore constitute attempts to be a successful, complete, and "good" person (Christopher, 1996).

Counseling that focuses on issues of self-efficacy and self-esteem (Young, 1992) addresses personhood from a similar perspective by

centering upon developmental progress in the social world. Self-reports of functioning may be biased or underreported by some clients (Cramer, 2000). For this reason, therapists may get more useful information by asking clients about their social interactions as indirect indicators of conflict coping.

Counselors and therapists may help clients with such matters by openly discussing moral visions of personhood. Social norms of cooperation and honor are generalized concepts, but they become highly personal when they contribute significantly to one's ideals of selfhood and identity. Shortsighted attempts at preserving honor and personhood may create very real consequences –they may reinforce one's moral vision of successful personhood while simultaneously jeopardizing his or her status in other ways.

For example, gender socialization may also shape an individual 's sense of honor. In the name of emotions management, one may hide his emotions because loss of control is not in keeping with his ideals of manhood (Perin, 1988) or with his notions of male autonomy. Similarly, a woman may be socialized into a gender role that encourages her to emphasize relational morality (Gilligan, 1986) and to avoid head-on confrontations about honor. In such different instances, emotions of honor and cooperation are perceived and managed in very different ways.

Threats to one's honor and personhood status may thereby be resolved with aggressive confrontation or with nonconfrontational discussion. Each solution may be perceived by the individual as "right" behavior to maintain proper personhood and to restore honor.

Strategy-wise, finding a practical balance between social cooperation and personal autonomy seems to be an important life-task for most people. In fact, such a task seems to be a primary issue in most forms of counseling and psychotherapy. A fundamental therapeutic issue here is the need for the counselor or therapist to recognize conflict-as-contest ideation. Such ideation typically produces superficial solutions aimed at some form of winning. Growth and learning may be minimal under such circumstances.

As an alternative, counselors and therapists may find the following methods beneficial to clients who are attempting to understand and resolve conflict in their own lives:

- Discussing cultural norms that affect personal psychology.
- Exploring the implications of gender socialization.
- Examining the consequences of conflict-as-contest.
- Discussing cultural ideas about revenge as resolution.
- Acknowledging the role that honor plays in conflict.

It might seem that the above list would only be appropriate for counseling clients of European descent, but that is not the case. People of all origins who come to the United States to live, have to figure out some way to handle the cultural milieu they find here. For some, the answer is acculturation –accepting the new norms or some aspects of the norms as their own. For others the answer might be to resist change as a way of preserving tradition. In both instances, however, the new norms and ways of doing things must be acknowledged and handled in some way.

Although British culture may have served as the historical template for American culture and its ideals, this origin changed over time into something peculiarly American. Immigrants from many nations influenced American culture to make it unique in its own right. Cultural norms of cooperation and those of autonomy that seem inherently contradictory came about in different ways. Normative ideals of autonomy and ambition emerged as appropriate behaviors in business, while those more conducive to cooperation arose for family life (Mintz & Kellogg, 1995). However, in that both sets of values were considered worthwhile, they became important in the socialization process whereby each new generation learned the rules of society. So even today, remnants of these

origins are expressed in American society. And they still often lead to conflict.

Conclusion

Cultural tendencies may encourage us to view conflict as a contest that produces only two possible outcomes – winning or losing. From a common sense perspective, this view is typically thought to represent the psychological understanding of conflict. However, when conflict and possible resolution are seen as constructs derived from the social world, conflict becomes a primary form of social phenomenon. In plain language, struggling with social conflict of one kind or another is common among counseling clients of all ages. Cultural ideals may lead people to mistake social forces for psychological traits, encouraging many to imagine that the causes of conflict exist exclusively within themselves. This view leads toward resolution strategies that are deemed psychologically sound, but which do not work well in the world of everyday life.

For such reasons, counselors may find therapeutic value in helping clients explore the cultural and social foundations of conflict. Understanding how social norms shape our thinking, for example, may be emancipating for many clients, simply because they can then see how factors other than their own failures contribute to conflict. In essence, this therapeutic effort presents a psychocultural view that places the individual

within the social world, and not within an isolated psychological world where conflict is often conceptualized solely as personal failure. The Adlerian idea of social interest as a therapeutic topic (Gibson & Mitchell, 1995) is akin to the method of exploring psychocultural forces operating on the individual.

Conflict involves both power and face-saving behaviors (Folger, Poole, & Stutman, 2001). However, both the expression of power (real or imagined) and saving-face are human behaviors that occur within the social world, not within the individual mind. Therapeutic help that examines behaviors involved in conflict may help clients understand themselves and their worlds in more adaptive ways. Social relationships, good or bad, are constructed on an understanding of the world. By examining the forces of culture and society that lead to predictable conflict behaviors, clients may envision new possibilities for themselves and others.

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